FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
Labor of Love

John M. Buchanan
September 3, 2000

The very term "work" has become problematic. We often use it as interchangeable with "vocation" as if all work should be considered a "calling" (*vocare*). The New Testament knows none of this. The calling of a Christian was to live out and spread the gospel. Paul "worked" at tent making only as much as necessary to support his "vocation." It is the vocation of every Christian to be what God requires in the society, workplace, and home where one finds oneself. Our vocation is more a life lived than a job performed.

Walter Wink
The Living Pulpit
The Gospel and Work

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LABOR OF LOVE
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Ecclesiastes 2:18-25
1 Corinthians 12:4-11

"There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil."
Ecclesiastes 2:24 (NRSV)

Dear God, we thank you for calling us to be your people; for giving us your gifts, our skills and abilities, our imagination, our creativity; and for that most powerful gift of all: our love that makes us restless until we find our true work and give our lives to its doing. Now startle us again with your truth and your presence and your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I don't recall seeing my father cry often. But one occasion impressed me so deeply I have never forgotten it. He was a fireman on the Pennsylvania Railroad in the days when that meant eight hours of shoveling coal from the tender into the firebox of a steam locomotive or into an apparatus called a stoker, a large screwlike device that delivered the coal to the fire. It was backbreaking work, and it was very dirty. A fireman came home covered with coal dust. But it was a job and it sustained him—and us. Thankfully, before he died, he was promoted to engineer in the time of diesel locomotives and enjoyed not only the added responsibility but also coming home without all the dirt and dust.

The incident I recall was during one of the recession periods in the late 1940s and early 50s. The economy slowed down; so did the railroad and the shops that were the primary source of employment for the whole community. Men were laid off and stood in line to receive unemployment. Everybody I knew was affected. All our fathers were out of work. Many tried to find alternative jobs—ushering in a movie theater, janitoring, pumping gas—but there weren't nearly enough jobs to go around. People were anxious and then frightened. The memory of the Great Depression was still fresh. Government surplus food was available after a while, but you had to stand in line and verify your unemployed status, and it was very difficult for my father to do that. Finally he swallowed his pride and stood in line and brought home a Government Aid parcel containing butter and cheese, flour and dried milk, and cans of beef stew. Mother tried to make an adventure of it, but the milk was awful and the beef stew—well, my brother said it looked like dog food and I added that it tasted like it, too. We were not ordinarily allowed the luxury of those kind of comments at the dinner table, but we got away with it that night. Our father quietly took our plates, scraped the beef stew into the garbage, and went into the living room, where he sat down, put his head in his hands, and cried.

Americans, more than any people on earth, have a love-hate relationship with work, and it is probably because, more than any people on earth, we seek and establish our identity on the basis of our jobs. Ask us who we are and we will tell you about our work. On the one hand, 80 percent of the American people say that they would continue to work even if they didn't have to. On the other hand, something like 95 percent of us say we hate our jobs! Walter Wink, professor at Auburn

Seminary, says that the highest incidence of heart attacks occur on Monday morning between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. when people are returning to work.

Work is a complicated topic, made more complex by the fact that our faith tradition itself says different things about it.

Today's text, for instance, begins with a fairly dismal view. It is from the book of Ecclesiastes, written several centuries before Christ by a kind of philosopher—or preacher, he is actually called—who reflects on the eternal question of the meaning of life. We know this philosopher mostly because of his lovely prose—"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die . . . .a time to mourn and a time to dance." Actually he's a cynic: "There's nothing new under the sun," he concludes. "Vanity of vanities. . . . All is vanity."

When Ecclesiastes reflects on the topic of work, he becomes almost wistful: "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun" (2:18).

Besides, he adds, I'm going to have to turn my work over to people who won't even do it like I do it: "and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled. . . . This also is vanity" (2:19) (Sounds like someone trying to talk himself into postponing retirement because his successor will never get it right.)

Finally, in verse 24, the writer makes a profound and good observation: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil."

Well, yes indeed. It occurs to me that right up there among the greatest blessings in life is going to work on Monday morning to a job you love, to be paid for what you would gladly do for nothing, in Ecclesiastes' words, "to find enjoyment in your toil."

But the fact remains that it is an illusive blessing. My father didn't experience it until the end of his life. Many—perhaps most men and women—never experience it. It is not only an illusive blessing, but it is complicated even further by the extraordinary economic climate in which we find ourselves.

Our market economy, on the one hand, has made everything for sale, and on the other hand, has created an abundance of goods to consume and work to do. Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain at the University of Chicago, in her new book, *Who Are We?* critiques the market mentality that marketizes everything. Elshtain is a conservative politically and economically, but from the perspective of Christian faith, she reminds her colleagues and readers that the market is not God: the market is as flawed and fallen and sinful as any other human institutions. "Do you want a blue-eyed, blond-haired, strapping son with athletic tendencies, perfect teeth, and a 75-year warranty?" she asks. You can get one in the market. A *New York Times* advertisement last year asked for egg donors. "Large financial incentive. Intelligent, athletic egg donor needed for loving family. . . . must be at least 5'10", have 1400 SAT score, and no medical issues. $50,000 and all expenses." "Sometimes," she says, "there really are slippery slopes, and in this area we seem to be on one" (p. 91).

Our faith tradition, based on the assertion that human beings are created in God's image, maintains that we have value because of that image within us: that therefore human beings,

regardless of their wealth, race, ethnicity, gender, life condition or station, deserve and are owed respect, dignity, equality, compassion, care, and love. And consequently that anything and everything that demeans and humiliates and vulgarizes human beings is not to be condoned and blessed, even if it is marketable and profitable. We have lost something essential to our humanity, ethicist Donald Shriver says, if the only issue is profit.

We now know, do we not, that planned economies are simply not as productive—industrially, technologically, agriculturally—as a free market, which rewards creativity, initiative, entreprenuerism, and hard work. "There is," Professor Elshtain says, "extraordinary energy and vibrancy in the world of capitalism and markets."

But, we also now know, do we not, that an unencumbered free market creates a huge and growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, that profits trickle up, not down—that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Linda Chavez-Thompson, executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, said recently and rightly, I suggest:

"There's something wrong in America when two people in the family are working and they don't have enough money for the doctor, or money to put in savings, or enough to pay for the children's education."

The other phenomenon the strong market has created is too much work. Elshtain maintains that we are caught in a vicious cycle of want-need-demand—and work. The more we want and need, the more we must work to earn the means to purchase. "And sometimes," Elshtain suggests, "we are out of control. Seven million Americans hold two or more jobs, up 65 percent since 1980. The average worker spends 163 hours a year more working than in 1980—and that is a whole month stolen from family, church, and community." (p. 65)

A *New York Times* editorial for Labor Day last year pointed to the fact that Americans have just passed the Japanese in the number of hours on the job—that we are working more and enjoying it less.

Have you noticed how the workplace has quietly and not so quietly invaded the rest of life? The cell phone allows the man behind me at Wrigley Field to carry on a running dialogue with his office for nine innings. Hotel lobbies and airport lounges are full of people talking loudly on cell phones, doing business. Even restaurants. A wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon just a few weeks ago showed a man wearing a business suit, alone at his table, cell phone in place—saying to two women sitting and talking animatedly at the next table, "Be quiet. I'm trying to do a deal."

Elshtain says the proper and faithful economic measurement is never profitability alone but enjoyment: not unlike Ecclesiastes' suggestion that "there is nothing better than finding enjoyment in your toil."

How to do that? How to find joy in your work?

Perhaps the most important biblical word about work comes later, from St. Paul, writing to the early church in Corinth. "There are varieties of gifts," Paul wrote, "but it is the same God who

activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Each is given a gift, a skill, an ability, to put to work for the common good. No one is left out. There is work for everyone, a special labor of love that God gives to each of us. Jim Forbes at Riverside Church, New York City, calls it "our project." Everyone has a project, a special task that is ours alone and for which we, uniquely and individually, have been equipped by God.

And so perhaps the most important task for each of us is to discern and discover and claim and do our project, our labor of love. What a blessing if we can earn a living at it, but not everyone can do that.

John Calvin, in a commentary on the subject, differentiates between work and vocation. Work, Calvin said, can be any kind of job. God doesn't rank jobs by priority. Our vocation is our calling. We are called—all of us, Calvin said—to be a Christian person, a child of God, and to use our gifts, in God's larger economy, for the common good—or as someone put it—to be useful.

Sometimes a job is the means by which we earn enough money to do our work, our vocation, our labor of love. There is a wonderful vignette in William Least Heat Moon's wonderful travelogue, *Blue Highways.* Traveling cross-country with his dog, Moon runs into an elderly gentleman and the conversation turns to work. The old gentleman says, "A man's never out of work if he's worth a damn. It's just sometimes he doesn't get paid. I've gone unpaid my share and I've pulled my share of pay. But that's got nothing to do with working. A man's work is doing what he's supposed to do."

Belden Lane, a delightful academic who was here for a Lenten Retreat a few years ago, confesses that his job is a cover for his real work. He writes, "My own particular cover is that of a university professor. It's a way of looking responsible while attending to much more important things." (*Christian Century,* 1/4/84-1/11/84, "Stalking the Snow Leopard: A Reflection on Work.)

So there's a project for you, work for you alone to do. It may or may not be the job you perform. You are doubly blessed if it is. But if it is not, you must not be limited, must not allow your job to keep you from the labor of love God has for you.

What is it for you? What is your special, unique labor of love? My favorite definition is by Frederick Buechner. "The place God calls you," Buechner wrote, "is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC's,* p. 118).

Our common vocation is to live as followers of Jesus Christ. That we all share. And when we seriously put heart and mind to that vocation, we see how deeply and passionately he loved this world, how radically he invested his own life, how completely he gave his life to the world. Following him means being like that: being deeply and passionately in the world; loving the world—loving the people God has given us to love, loving our neighbor—as God's precious gift. And—claiming our gifts, our skills and abilities—our labor of love.

"There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil."

It will be different for each of us, as St. Paul observed. Some will teach, some will sing, some will write, some will be lovers, some will plant trees. Some will heal, some will be instruments of grace

and enable children to become all they can become, some will argue cases, some will advocate in the political arena, some will deliver mail, some will wash dishes, and some will clean streets—but each has a project, a labor of love.

I will never forget the night my father cried because he was so humiliated, unemployed and unable to provide in the way he wanted to, and therefore—it must have seemed to him, with his children eating government surplus food—not the man he wanted to be. But thanks be to God, his job did not limit or ultimately define him. His labor of love was his love of life and his determination to live and experience every day from sunrise to starry night, a love and determination he passed on to his sons. And his garden, flowering plants, procured from the gardens of friends, lovingly planted and worked and tended after work, on days off, sometimes for his entire two-week vacation. It was his project, and I am reminded of it and continue to be grateful every time the iris bloom in the Garth in the spring, because among them are his iris, which I have brought with me from each place I have lived, to replant—living reminders of a labor of love, reminders that God has work for each of us to do in the economy of creation, our own labor of love.

Amen.